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ABSTRACT

It is time for the field of student affairs to put aside its four-decade preoccupation with professional status and recognize that its identity as a field is essentially an administrative convenience linked by an allegiance to a common philosophical perspective on its work and by nature of its clientele and the milieu in which it is practiced. Attention should be turned to the development of a fully professional staff, one that is highly educated and motivated to serve its student clientele. (ABL)

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The Professionalization of Student Affairs Staff

Paul A. Bloland

Overview

For well over four decades, the field of college and university student affairs has been wrestling with the question, "Are we a profession?" Implicit in the question, and a justification for its continuing examination is a sense of marginality, of subordination of student affairs staff in the academic enterprise. Implicit also is the suggestion that to be recognized as a profession would confer additional status along with concomitant benefits. The resolution of the question, therefore, is not just an academic exercise but, as is true of many other quasi or emerging professions, one which strikes at the heart of the identity and self-concept as well as the morale of the people who constitute the field. It is the purpose of this digest to examine the definition of a profession that the field uses to assess itself and then to move on to a more profitable conceptualization of the argument.

Is Student Affairs a Profession?

The answer to the question, "Is student affairs a profession?" is quite clearly, "No". Regardless of the analysis undertaken or the criteria used, the analysts inevitably conclude that the field continues to fall short of the models traditionally employed as yardsticks. Wrenn and Darley (1949) essentially began the process by assessing the field against eight criteria and concluding that "student personnel work is not yet a profession" (p. 286).

The Wrenn and Darley criteria were simple and inclusive and provide a useful yardstick against which to gauge progress toward professional status:

1. The application of standards of selection and training
2. The definition of job titles and functions
3. The possession of a body of specialized knowledge and skills
4. The development of a professional consciousness and of professional groups
5. The self-imposition of standards of admission and performance
6. The legal recognition of the vocation
7. The development of a code of ethics
8. The performance of a socially needed function

Stamatakos (1981) re-examined the Wrenn and Darley analysis 32 years later and came to essentially the same conclusion, "Student affairs is still 'en route to professional status'" (p. 204). He revisited the scene again in 1989 (Bloland & Stamatakos, 1989–90) only to find that little had changed. The only criteria that appeared to be fully met were, "development of a professional consciousness and professional groups" and "performance of a socially needed function" (p. 31).

It is true that a number of professionalizing steps have been taken in recent years to respond to obvious needs in the field, i.e., the adoption of the American College Personnel Association's code of ethics (1981), and the "Standards of Practice" by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (1983). One can also cite the standards and guidelines adopted by the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (1986). However helpful to the field these much needed developments may be, student affairs still falls short of meeting the recognized criteria of a profession and, for the reasons listed here, it is unlikely that the field will ever achieve the status of a profession.

Why Student Affairs Will Not Become a Profession

While it may appear that the field could become a profession simply by exerting a special effort to develop programs and standards which would fulfill the accepted criteria for a profession, the field is far too loosely defined and variegated for it to qualify as a whole. Canon (1982) argued that "we are a collection of professions functioning in the student affairs area" (p. 468). Rickard (1988) stated that student affairs is simply an administrative designation "for a grouping of functions, department, disciplines, programs, and multiple evolving professions." In his well-known critique of the failure of student personnel work to become a profession, Penney (1969) concluded that there is no occupational entity or identifiable point of view that can be identified as a profession. "...the field is now composed by a number of relatively separate and distinct specialities linked together largely by organizational contiguity (i.e., they all involve working with students out of classrooms) and, to a lesser extent, by the sharing of a common philosophical view of their tasks" (p. 961).

It is this organizational heterogeneity that militates against the possibility of student affairs ever becoming recognized as a profession. As Bloland and Stamatakos (1989–90) put it, "How can student affairs be evaluated against the Wrenn and Darley (1949)...or any other set of criteria of professionalism when the field is comprised of such disparate work activities as academic advisement, psychotherapy, career development, medicine, student activity advising, paraprofessional counseling, residence hall advising, management, orientation, and the like?" (p. 32). Several of the specialties offered in the typical

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student affairs organization are already recognized as emerging professions, i.e., counseling/ psychotherapy and medicine, and may meet most or all of any set of criteria that may be advanced but what do they, in substantive terms, share with student activity advising or orientation programming other than their administrative placement in a student affairs program?

Professionalism: A Viable Alternative

An alternative to the inconclusive and seemingly futile pursuit of professional status for the field of student affairs may be found in the concept of professionalism. It is the exhibition of professional behavior that marks the practitioner in the field as a professional, that justifies the use of the term, "professional," when we talk about student affairs services and staff. Rickard (1988) has proposed a paradigm which acknowledges the multiprofessional characteristics of student affairs, minimizing the identity crises associated with the traditional criteria of a profession and focusing instead on being a competent professional.

Professionalism: Moore's Model

What does it mean to be a professional? Moore (1970) has developed a set of six criteria that can be applied to any occupational role. The occupation itself may not be recognized as a profession but its practitioners may perform their tasks in the occupation as professionals. Moore's criteria are as follows:

1. The professional is in a full-time occupation.
2. There must be a commitment to a calling, a strong inner impulse to identify with the field of student affairs, a sense of identification with the field, and a loyalty to its philosophy and purpose. It is not seen simply as one more job in one's work life or as a stepping stone to something better but, rather, as a lifelong pursuit.
3. The commitment to the field is one that is held in common with others in the same occupational role which leads to identifying with them through membership and participation in professional associations such as the American College Personnel Association.
4. The professional must possess specialized knowledge which can only be acquired through a long and rigorous educational regimen such as an appropriate graduate program.
5. The professional is characterized by a service orientation. Meeting the needs of students is a core value of the field and requires constant attention to the maintenance of professional competence and knowledge as exemplified by attendance at conferences, workshops, seminars, research activity, professional reading, and the like.
6. Although sometimes more difficult to achieve in a collegiate bureaucracy than in other settings, professionals are perceived as so competent and knowledgeable that they are permitted a lot of autonomy in the practice of their specialty.

The Moore criteria provide a ready gauge of the extent to which student affairs staff members are rendering professional-level services in a fully professional manner.

Conclusion

It is time for the field of student affairs to put aside its 4-decade preoccupation with professional status and recognize that its identity as a field is essentially an administrative convenience linked by an allegiance to a common philosophical perspective on its work and by the nature of its clientele and the milieu in which it is practiced, i.e., college students in the out-of-class setting. The very diversity of the program and its specialized staff essentially preclude the development of the kind of common core of highly specialized knowledge that could lead to legal recognition and licensing, for example.

The field and its specialties is characterized by its diversity which can be perceived as a strength rather than as a handicap because it is this heterogeneity that enables student affairs to meet the individualized needs of a student body which itself is increasingly diversified and heterogeneous. Rather than further discussion of the field of student affairs as a profession, attention should instead be turned to the development of a fully professional staff, one that is highly educated and motivated to serve its student clientele.

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